

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1587
INFO AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
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E. O. 11652: NA
TAGS: ECON, IN
SUBJECT: ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE AND POLICIES: THE JANATAA
AFTER FOURTEEN MONTHS

1. SUMMARY: THE INDIAN ECONOMY EXPERIENCED VERY FAVORABLE
(AROUND SEVEN PERCENT) GROWTH IN 1977-78, PRIMARILY BE-
CAUSE OF AN EXCELLENT MONSOON LAST SUMMER THAT RESULTED
IN A RECORD FOODGRAIN HARVEST. BUFFER STOCKS OF FOODGRAINS
ARE HIGH. PRICES HAVE BEEN GENERALLY KEPT UNDER CONTROL,
AND THE BALANCE OF PAYMENTS SITUATION HAS BEEN BUOYANT
WITH RECORD FOREIGN EXCHANGE RESERVES. THE INDUSTRIAL
SECTOR, HOWEVER, CONTINUES TO BE TROUBLED. THE GENERAL
SHAPE OF JANATA ECONOMIC POLICIES IS BEGINNING TO EMERGE.
CLEARLY THE GOVERNMENT IS COMMITTED TO GREATER EMPHASIS
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ON AGRICULTURE/RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND SMALL SCALE, LABOR-
INTENSIVE UNITS. THERE HAVE BEEN A FEW SUCEESFUL POLICY
INITIATIVES, SUCH AS THE LIBERALIZED IMPORT POLICY FOR
1978-79 DESIGNED TO STIMULATE IMPORTS, EMPLOYMENT AND
EXPORT-ORIENTED FIRMS. THE GOVERNMENT IS HIGHLY CONCERNED
OVER PROTECTIONIST PRESSURES IN THE US AND EUROPE. IT
HAS WORKED TO IMPROVE TRADE TIES WITH ITS NEIGHBORS AND

OTHER ASIAN AND AFRICAN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES FOR BOTH ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL REASONS. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE INDUSTRIAL POLICY HAS BEEN RIDDLED WITH INCONSISTENCIES, AND BUSINESSMEN ARE DEPRESSED BY THE GOVERNMENT'S FAILURE TO LIFT CONTROLS SUFFICIENTLY OR TO PROVIDE SIGNIFICANT INCENTIVES TO INCREASE INVESTMENT. THE JANATA COALITION OF DIVERGENT INTERESTS HAS YET TO GET ITS ECONOMIC ACT TOGETHER. A MAJOR TEST OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE COMING YEAR WILL BE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF ITS ECONOMIC POLICIES, BUT JUDGING FROM ITS PERFORMANCE DURING THE PAST YEAR, THE PROSPECTS ARE NOT ALTOGETHER HOPEFUL. THIS MESSAGE HAS RELIED SUBSTANTIALLY ON REPORTS FROM THE THREE CONGRES. END SUMMARY.

2. PERFORMANCE. THE INDIAN ECONOMY PERFORMED RELATIVELY WELL DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF JANATA RULE. GNP GREW BY APPROXIMATELY SEVEN PERCENT, PRIMARILY BECAUSE OF A RECORD FOODGRAIN HARVEST OF CLOSE TO 125 MILLION MT. FOODGRAIN STOCKS ARE EXPECTED TO BE AROUND 20 MILLION MT IN MID 1978. PRICE RISES WERE KEPT UNDER CONTROL, PRIMARILY DURING THE SECOND HALF OF LAST FISCAL YEAR. FOREIGN TRADE WAS ESSENTIALLY IN BALANCE IN 1977-78, AND FOREIGN EXCHANGE RESERVES INCREASED BY \$2 BILLION DURING THE YEAR, REACHING \$5.8 BILLION BY MARCH 1978. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE INDUSTRIAL SECTOR CONTINUES TO BE TROUBLED BY INADEQUATE CONSUMER DEMAND, POWER SHORTAGES, LABOR PROBLIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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LEMS, INSUFFICIENT INVESTMENT AND LOW PROFITS. UNDERLYING PROBLEMS - A POPULATION INCREASE OF AROUND 13 MILLION PER YEAR; GROWING UNEMPLOYMENT AND UNDEREMPLOYMENT; SOCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS TO PROGRESS, PARTICULARLY IN RURAL AREAS; AND THE CONTINUING DEPLETION OF SUCH RESOURCES AS SOIL AND TREES - ARE OF COURSE NOT SUSCEPTIBLE TO ANY SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS.

3. MOST OF THE ABOVE-AVERAGE PERFORMANCE OF THE ECONOMY IN 1977-78 CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE VERY FAVORABLE MONSOON LAST SUMMER, AS WELL AS CONTINUATION OF RECENT PAST TRENDS IN THE BALANCE OF PAYMENTS. HOWEVER, SOME OF THE PRACTICAL, SHORT-TERM MEASURES TAKEN BY THE JANATA GOVERNMENT HAVE HELPED NOT ONLY GENERAL PERFORMANCE BUT ESPECIALLY IN HOLDING DOWN PRICES SUCH AS ABOLITION OF FOOD ZONES, LIBERAL IMPORTS OF EDIBLE OILS, PROMPT STOPPAGE OF THE EXPORTS OF ESSENTIAL FOOD ITEMS LIKE VEGETABLES, POTATOES AND ONIONS, AND THE INTRODUCTION OF FAIRER PROCUREMENT PRICES FOR WHEAT AND RICE.

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4. ECONOMIC POLICIES. THE GENERAL SHAPE OF THE JANATA'S LONGER-TERM ECONOMIC POLICIES IS NOW CLEAR, ALTHOUGH SEVERAL IMPORTANT POLICY MATTERS (E.G. INCOMES/WAGES, ECONOMIC CONTROLS AND SICK INDUSTRIES) HAVE YET TO BE FORMULATED. THE GOVERNMENT IS CLEARLY COMMITTED TO GREATER EMPHASIS ON THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR, RURAL DEVELOPMENT SMALLSCALE UNITS AND EMPLOYMENT GENERATION. IN THE 1978-83 PLAN AGRICULTURE/RURAL DEVELOPMENT ACCOUNTS FOR 43 PERCENT OF PLANNED SPENDING, IN CONTRASTS TO 38 PERCENT IN THE PREVIOUS PLAN. THE GOVERNMENT HAS PROPOSED THE ESTABLISHMENT OF DISTRICT CENTERS TO SERVICE SMALL INDUSTRIES, INTENSIVE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SELECTED BLOCKS, AND A MORE INTEGRATED RURAL HEALTH EFFORT. IRRIGATION AND POWER ARE MAJOR PRIORITIES. PLAN TARGETS ARE GENERALLY MORE REALISTIC THAN IN THE PAST. HOWEVER, THE JANATA POLICY

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PRONOUNCEMENTS HAVE OFTEN NOT BEEN BACKED UP BY APPROPRIATE ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES, AND A MAJOR TEST OF THE

JANATA PARTY DURING THE COMING YEAR WILL BE IMPLEMENTATION OF ITS ECONOMIC POLICIES. THE GOVERNMENT IS APPARENTLY NOT INCLINED TO PUSH SUCH PROGRAMS AS LAND REFORM, INCLUDING LAND CONSOLIDATION, AND DEBT RELIEF TO THE RURAL POOR. FOOD FOR WORK PROJECTS HAVE NOW BEEN ORGANIZED IN SOME STATES, PARTICULARLY IN EASTERN INDIA AND KARNATAKA. IN GENERAL, THE STATES ARE NOT DOING A SUFFICIENTLY GOOD JOB ON RESOURCE MOBILIZATION (E.G. WATER AND ELECTRICITY RATES ARE USUALLY TOO LOW, WEALTHY FARMERS ARE NOT TAXED ENOUGH OR NOT AT ALL). SOME STATES ARE FACED WITH BUDGET DEFICITS, AND MOST ARE DEMANDING AND GETTING MORE FUNDS FROM THE CENTER.

5. THE JANATA'S FORMULATIONS OF ITS INDUSTRIAL POLICIES HAVE BEEN CHARACTERIZED BY SOME AMBIGUITY, PARTLY A REFLECTION OF THE DIVERSE INTERESTS IN THE COALITION. IN GENERAL, THE GOVERNMENT WANTS MORE EMPHASIS ON SMALL SCALE, LABOR-INTENSIVE FIRMS; LARGE BUSINESS HOUSES IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR SHOULD NOT EXPAND INTO CERTAIN AREAS AND SHOULD GENERATE THEIR OWN FUNDS INTERNALLY. THE RECENT JANATA STATEMENT - LARGE FIRMS WHICH HAVE SUBSTANTIALLY DEPENDED ON PUBLIC FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS FOR THEIR CAPITAL SHOULD BE BROUGHT DIRECTLY UNDER PUBLIC CONTROL - HAS BEEN JUDGED BY MOST BUSINESSMEN TO BE LARGELY GOVERNMENT RHETORIC AGAINST THE "EVILS" OF BIG BUSINESS. THE PRIVATE SECTOR HAS BEEN DISAPPOINTED BY THE JANATA'S INDUSTRIAL PRONOUNCEMENTS. BUSINESSMEN FEEL THAT ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROLS, WHILE PARTIALLY LIBERALIZED, ARE STILL TOO PERVASIVE AND THAT MONETARY/FISCAL INCENTIVES TO EXPAND INVESTMENT AND OUTPUT HAVE BEEN TOO LITTLE.

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6. ON THE EXTERNAL ECONOMIC SIDE, THE GOVERNMENT CONTINUES TO FAVOR EXPORT PROMOTION IN GENERAL AS A MEANS OF GENERATING MORE DOMESTIC EMPLOYMENT AND DEVELOPMENT, BUT GOODS IN SHORT SUPPLY ON THE LOCAL MARKET ARE NOT TO BE EXPORTED. THERE HAS BEEN GENERAL AGREEMENT WITH THE IMPORT LIBERALIZATION POLICY FOR 1978-79. HOWEVER, ITS ONE YEAR DURATION IS CONTRARY TO A KEY RECOMMENDATION OF THE ALEXANDER COMMITTEE, WHICH WANTED A THREE YEAR POLICY TO PROVIDE A STABLE WORKING ENVIRONMENT. THE GOVERNMENT WOULD LIKE TO HAVE BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS IMPORT MORE GOODS TO ENCOURAGE EXPORT-ORIENTED FIRMS BUT PRIMARILY TO USE UP SOME FOREIGN EXCHANGE FOR DEVELOPMENT PURPOSES, BUT THE INEXORABLE RISE IN FX RESERVES TESTIFIES TO OFFICIAL FAILURE SO FAR ON THIS FRONT. THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN UNABLE TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF AVAILABLE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES (IN THE FORM OF FOODGRAINS STOCKS, FX RESERVES AND UNUSED INDUSTRIAL

CAPACITY). THE JANATA'S ATTITUDE TOWARD FOREIGN AID IS AMBIVALENT: THE PLANNING COMMISSION'S DRAFT PLAN FOR 1978-83 WOULD LIJ THE COUNTRY TO MOVE TOWARD SELF-RELIANCE, WHEREAS THE FINANCE MINISTRY WANTS AS MUCH FOREIGN ASSISTANCE AS POSSIBLE SO LONG AS IT FITS IN WITH GOI OBJECTIVES AND IS NOT "INTRUSIVE". FOREIGN INVESTORS ARE WELCOME ONLY ON OFFICIAL TERMS (IN CORE SECTORS, PRODUCTION FOR EXPORT), BUT THE GOVERNMENT ACTUALLY PREFERS OUTRIGHT PURCHASE OF FOREIGN TECHNOLOGY.

7. BILATERAL-MULTILATERAL TRADE ISSUES. TWO FACTORS HAVE SHAPED THE JANATA GOVERNMENT'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS ITS FOREIGN TRADE RELATIONS: GROWING REALIZATION THAT

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THE WEST IS THE BEST AND, IN SOME CASES, THE ONLY SOURCE OF THE GOODS AND TECHNOLOGY NEEDED FOR INDIA'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT; AND THE CONTINUED COMMITMENT TO EXPORTS. DURING THE PAST YEAR THERE HAS BEEN A SURGE IN PROTECTIONIST PRESSURE IN INDIA'S MAJOR WESTERN TRADING PARTNERS, THE US AND THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY. THE GOVERNMENT STILL FEELS BRUISED BY EC BEHAVIOR DURING THE NEGOTIATIONS

TO EXTEND THE MULTIFIBER ARRANGEMENT. IT RECOGNIZES THAT THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION HAS MADE GREAT EFFORTS TO CONTAIN PROTECTIONISM IN THE US, BUT IT IS WORRIED BY THE STEADY FLOW OF PETITIONS FOR TRADE RESTRAINTS AND THE THREAT OF PENDING CASES. INDIA HAS PARTICIPATED ACTIVELY IN THE MULTILATERAL TRADE NEGOTIATIONS BECAUSE OF THE BENEFITS IT WILL GET FROM TRADE LIBERALIZATION. NOW HOWEVER, IT SEES ITS SPECIAL INTERESTS BEING STEAMROLLED LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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BY THE US, EC AND JAPAN IN THE RUSH TO THE DEADLINE THIS JULY. BECAUSE OF THESE BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL DEVELOPMENTS, THE GOVERNMENT HAS MADE THE STRENGTHENING AND EXPANSION OF OPEN MARKETS IN THE WEST ITS PRIMARY FOREIGN ECONOMIC POLICY GOAL. WORK ON STRUCTURAL IMPROVEMENTS IN INTERNATIONAL COMMODITY TRADE, WHILE ACTIVELY PURSUED BY INTERESTED OFFICIALS WITHIN THE BUREAUCRACY AND TRADE, DOES NOT HAVE THE ATTENTION OF THE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP.

8. TRADE TIES AND WATER RESOURCE ISSUES PLAY A PROMINENT PART IN THE TOTAL CONTEXT OF INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH ITS NEIGHBORS. THE JANATA GOVERNMENT HAS TAKEN ACTIONS IN THESE AREAS TO IMPROVE BILATERAL TIES: TRADE AND TRANSIT TREATIES PLUS AN ANTI-SMUGGLING AGREEMENT WERE SIGNED WITH NEPAL; AN AGREEMENT ON THE SALA DAM WAS REACHED WITH PAKISTAN AND TRADE TALKS ARE BEING HELD; BILATERAL TRADE TIES HAVE BEEN RESUMED WITH CHINA, ALTHOUGH ON A VERY SMALL SCALE; AND A SHORT-TERM SETTLEMENT OF THE FARAKKA BARRAGE ISSUE WAS MADE WITH BANGLADESH. AS GESTURES OF FRIENDSHIP TO NEARBY COUNTRIES, THE GOVERNMENT HAS MADE WHEAT LOANS TO AFGHANISTAN AND VIETNAM. THE GOVERNMENT IS ACTING TO STRENGTHEN ECONOMIC TIES WITH THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES OF ASIA AND AFRICA WITH AN EYE TO BOTH THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL BENEFITS.

9. COMMENT: WHEN THE JANATA GOVERNMENT CAME TO POWER THERE WERE GENERAL EXPECTATIONS (PROBABLY UNREALISTICALLY HIGH) THAT CONTROLS WOULD BE LOOSENED SO THAT THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND THE ECONOMY COULD PERFORM MORE EFFICIENTLY AND THAT A NEW PATTERN OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT MIGHT EMERGE. THESE HOPES HAVE LARGELY DISSIPATED. TANGIBLE POLICY ACHIEVEMENTS HAVE BEEN RELATIVELY FEW (LIBERALIZED IMPORTS PROCEDURES IS ONE EXCEPTION). THE GREATER LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ZED IMPORTS PROCEDURES IS ONE EXCEPTION). THE GREATER

EMPHASIS ON AGRICULTURAL/RURAL DEVELOPMENT HAS BEEN GENERALLY PRAISED BUT BECAUSE LITTLE PROGRESS HAS YET BEEN MADE SOME CRITICISM HAS BEEN VOICED THAT IT IS ESSENTIALLY "OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES", LITTLE DIFFERENT FROM OLD CONGRESS PARTY POLICIES.

10. THE DRIFT IN ECONOMIC PROGRAMS IS PRIMARILY A REFLECTION OF THE INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN THE JANATA COALITION. THE INCONSISTENT INDUSTRIAL POLICY IS THE MOST OBVIOUS EXAMPLE. NONE OF THE TOP ECONOMIC POLICY-MAKERS HAS MADE A STRONG POSITIVE IMPRESSION. FINANCE MINISTER PATEL IS REGARDED AS BEING TOO FISCALLY CONSERVATIVE; INDUSTRY MINISTER FERNADES IS SEEN AS DYNAMIC AND PRAGMATIC, BUT GOING OFF IN MANY DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS AT ONCE; CHEMICALS MINISTER BAHUGUNA APPEARS TO HAVE LESS INFLUENCE THAN EXPECTED. POWERFUL MINISTERS NOT NORMALLY INVOLVED IN ECONOMIC POLICY (SUCH AS HOME MINISTER CHARAN SINGH AND DEFENSE MINISTER JAGJIVAN RAM) HAVE PROMOTED THEIR OWN ECONOMIC PHILOSOPHIES. DESAI GENERALLY REMAINS ABOVE THE ECONOMIC BATTLE. IN SHORT, THE JANATA GOVERNMENT HAS YET TO GET ITS ECONOMIC ACT TOGETHER.

11. THE PROSPECTS FOR ANY FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN THIS SITUATION DO NOT APPEAR PROMISING. THE CHANCES FOR ANY MAJOR SHIFT IN ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE OR POLICIES ARE NOT GREAT IN THIS LARGE, DIVERSE AND POOR COUNTRY. IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAMS WILL LARGELY DEPEND, AS ALWAYS, ON THE BUREAUCRACY AT THE CENTER AND IN THE STATES. ONLY STRONG POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AT THE TOP CAN MAKE THE JANATA'S ECONOMIC PROGRAM WORK, BUT THE EXISTENCE OF NON-JANATA STATE GOVERNMENTS AND SEVERAL INCOMPETENT JANATA CHIEF MINISTERS ARE INHIBITING FACTORS. SO FAR THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN ENJOYING RELATIVELY FAVORABLE ECONOMIC WEATHER, BUT WILL BE PUT TO A REAL TEST WHEN A STORM COMES. HOW WILL THE GOVERNMENT HANDLE THE PRICE FRONT IF THERE IS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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A POOR MONSOON? FOR THE LONGER HAUL, WILL POLICYMAKERS BE ABLE TO IMPLEMENT SUCCESSFULLY (I.E. MEET OFFICIAL TARGETS) SUCH PROGRAMS AS IRRIGATION, POWER, AND FAMILY PLANNING? THE ECONOMIC SIGNS IN THE PAST YEAR HAVE NOT BEEN AUSPICIOUS, AND ON THIS BASIS, WE DO NOT EXPECT INDIA'S PRESENT LEADERSHIP TO BRING ABOUT FASTER GROWTH AND REDUCE SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES, AT LEAST IN THE SHORT TERM.
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